



Conservation in action?

Why a dead rhino is a good rhino

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THE handful of white rhino surviving in southern Africa were once a potent symbol of endangered species. But last week the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, meeting in Bangkok, quietly allowed rich westerners to go and hunt them once more. And they declared it a victory for conservation.

Many animal-lovers choked on the news. The International Fund for Animal Welfare declared it "a dangerous message that commercial interests outweigh the long-term survival of the species". But conservation groups like WWF supported the decision.

The explanation for this conundrum goes to the heart of what CITES is and isn't about, and highlights the gap in expectation between trade and conservation and animal rights. "Some people think that CITES is a conservation convention in a pure sense. Actually it is a trade convention, albeit to limit trade where that is necessary," says Will Travers, president of the Species Survival Network, an organisation of conservation scientists.

And that means that under CITES, killing animals is not necessarily a bad thing, as the convention believes that properly managed hunting and trade in animals and their parts can generate the funds that will ultimately protect them. This approach is described by Susan Mainka, head of the World Conservation Union's delegation in Bangkok, as "incentive-driven conservation".

So last week CITES eased restrictions on hunting leopards and the southern white rhino, and killing Nile crocodiles for

their leather and US bald eagles for their feathers.

The incentive approach also explains why CITES decided not to impose a total ban on buying and selling lions and their parts, even though there are only around 20,000 of the animals left. Instead it maintained the status quo by continuing to allow a licensed trade. Kristen Nowell of the World Conservation Union's cat specialist group says, "The primary threats to lions are not related to trade. They are killings stemming from conflicts with humans and loss of habitat." Moreover, the sale of hunting licences and live lions to zoos may be the best way to give lions commercial value, and so encourage farmers to protect rather than slaughter them.

That rationale explains why CITES may one day allow the international trade in elephant ivory to resume. At the moment it is setting up scientific monitoring of elephant populations and the ivory trade, in the hope that it can police a return to a lucrative legal trade that can bring cash for conservation without triggering unbridled poaching.

But CITES did act at the meeting to stop commercial trade in a number of species from threatening their very survival. For instance, it placed the great white shark on Appendix II, which should curtail the booming trade in the animal's teeth and jaws, a trade which decimated the shark's numbers. It did the same for the humphead wrasse, whose population has declined by 99 per cent in some places, and also listed some Asian trees – such as the ramin hardwood, prized for making furniture, and agarwood, which produces an oil used in expensive perfumes. ●

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